

Survey

Draft

Abstract

A pilot project is proposed for using a modified interview technique to evaluate bilingual proficiency as a part of sociolinguistic field work. The proposal is motivated by a desire to make best use of available manpower, and by a search for better and more natural evaluation techniques. Requirements for preparation, training and a practicum are outlined.

Introduction

One frustration in our South Asia Sociolinguistic Survey projects has been the lack of methods to distinguish higher levels of bilingual ability. We also have a long standing desire to try to evaluation methods which sound more "natural" to our test subjects so that even more bashful ones are willing to participate. For some time we have thought that some modified form of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) interview technique pioneered by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) holds some promise of resolving these difficulties.

But recently it has occurred to me that this technique may also provide an answer to other problems, that of making best use of available researchers, and of finding a good way to get acquainted during field work in a new area. In our first field work in the upper Swat valley, we budgeted a full month for language learning and relationship building. This proved to be an excellent way to become acquainted and accepted in a new community, though perhaps a month was more time than was needed.

In the Indus survey, we did not budget this time in the beginning. I found that at least in my case, language learning was not very effective when it

was sandwiched in between other tasks. Of course, one of the reasons we didn't do any language learning was because we had our national co-researchers with us, and we didn't know how we could effectively involve them during this period, since they did not have any training in language learning. Involving them in interviews would help get them involved in the community and also give us the time needed for language learning.

The possibility of training our co-researchers in an FSI-type interview technique was mentioned in our discussions last December in Kathmandu. This possibility was further confirmed during our work calibrating the sentence repetition test using the Other Evaluation technique, when the following incident took place.

Nooran, one of our co-researchers, took leave for a few days due to a land sale dispute between his father and the father of a former classmate of his. This other family is from the Hindko-language group in Peshawar city. However, from his classmate's pronunciation, Nooran had not previously known that he was anything other than a mother tongue Pashtu speaker. But he said that as soon as he heard the father speak, he immediately knew that he was a Hindko speaking fellow. Nooran immediately began thinking of the proficiency descriptions he had been using to interview raters, and he tried to place his classmate's father on these scales. Later, he met one of his classmate's uncles, whose Pashtu accent was a puzzling combination of two geographically separate Pashtu accents. Sure enough, the uncle had spent a number of years in each of the two places!

Nooran was confident that he would be able to rate a stranger's Pashtu ability after a half-hour conversation or so, provided that he could memorize the proficiency descriptions. It was at this point that I began to think more concretely about the possibilities of using the interview

technique in a pilot test during our field work this summer, and thereby evaluate whether this technique might bring us a better evaluation procedure and also help us make better use of available researchers.

Briefly, the proposal is to begin the next field work with a 2-3 week period of getting acquainted with the local population. During this time, the expatriate co-researcher would work on learning the local language, and the national co-researcher would gather community profile information, and conduct FSI-type interviews of a cross-section of the community. Both of these tasks -- language learning and FSI interviewing -- are well suited being conducted in an informal way where the researchers are primarily just getting acquainted with the local population. Later, after this initial period is completed, other techniques could be used to evaluate bilingualism and/or dialect intelligibility.

The remainder of this paper will describe the preparation and training which would be required before field work could begin on a pilot project using a modified FSI interview technique.

Preparation

About one week would be required to gather available materials and prepare a detailed syllabus and materials for the training period. Quakenbush (1987) describes how he trained two Filipinos for a similar interview project. Hendricks et al (1980) describe how one instructor and three graduate students prepared themselves to conduct FSI-type interviews of speakers of English as a second language, which is reproduced in Appendix I. It also contains a list of possible interview topics, reproduced in appendix II. A visit to the US Educational Foundation in Islamabad may provide information about language specific "benchmarks" and/or the

availability of training tapes of sample FSI oral interviews. While benchmarks and training tapes would be useful, their availability would make this pilot project less useful in demonstrating that this kind of project is possible in a language where such aids weren't available.

Perhaps even more important than these more formal sources, it is hoped that Frank Blair will be able to provide constructive comments to this proposal based on his recent participation in the Sierra Leon conference, which attempted to adapt the FSI rating scale and interview technique to a rural environment.

Training

About two to three weeks of training would be necessary to prepare national co-researchers to conduct FSI-type interviews. In this particular project the time would be a bit less, since some facets of the training have already been included in our use of the Other Evaluation technique to calibrate the sentence repetition test.

The first facet of training would aim to promote an understanding of the rating scales. This would include a discussion of the scales and the proficiency descriptions. Perhaps the best way to grapple with the meanings would be to translate them into the local language of wider communication (LWC). Our experience showed this to be such a valuable technique that it may be good to include this cooperative translation and discussion even if the proficiency descriptions should already have been translated previously into the local LWC. In our particular case, however, this would not be necessary since our co-researchers were involved in the translation effort. Some additional discussion, however, would be beneficial to promote fuller understanding of the rating scales.

Training in the interview technique, however, would have to begin from scratch. Three basic areas need to be discussed. First is the general tone of the interview, which on the surface should appear to be a normal, everyday conversation, even though it is a highly structured interview. Of utmost importance is keeping the interviewee at ease throughout the interview.

Secondly, the structure of the interview itself must be learned. It begins (if I remember the technique correctly) with a get-acquainted phase, then an exploratory period where an initial guess is made of the subject's ability. A confirming period double checks that the subject can perform at that level, then a probing period is designed to stretch the subject into areas which he may not be comfortable. This guarantees that he is not rated too low. Finally, an easing off period consists of topics well within the subject's ability so that he will leave the interview feeling good about his performance. It would be especially interesting to know if this structure needs to be adapted or simplified to take into consideration our interviewers, our subjects and the environment of the interview.

Third, a repertoire of questions, topics and tasks must be provided for the interviewer. The list from Hendricks et al in Appendix II is a good starting point, but will require adaption for a rural environment. This adaptation may also allow inclusion of questions and topics which are of interest in building a demographic and sociolinguistic picture of the community. In this way, the FSI interview could well be "piggy-backed" onto the collection of preliminary questionnaire information (PQ's) for a community profile. We should, however, consider the possible side-effect of reducing the "naturalness" of the interview. The discussion and

adaptation of these topics could very well be an integral part of the training process.

Another part of the training could consist of listening to and evaluating tapes of practice interviews if they are available.

Evaluation could consist of formal written exams, such as Quakerburst, used, and also practice interviews. For the latter, it would be good for the expatriate researcher to be involved also, conducting interviews of speakers of English as a second language. This would allow some very productive discussion of ways to improve the technique and the training, and would help instill a feeling of working together.

Practicum

These techniques would finally be put into practice during the first 2-3 weeks of the next period of field work. This would tentatively involve Chas and Nooran among Ushojo speakers in the upper Bishigram valley, beginning in the middle of June. Nooran has suggested that we try to rent a house up there. The Ushojo language is spoken just above the Pashtu speaking village of Bishigram, which in turn is up-valley of the town of Shanku where Nooran and I spent an enjoyable week of field work last November. Shanku and Chail, lower down the valley, are the two villages in the side-valley dialect area of Torwali. The valley, alternately known as the Chail Nullah or the Bishigram Nullah, extends to the East from the main valley of the river Swat at Madayn, the uppermost Pashtu speaking town in the main Swat valley.

The pilot project would take the first two weeks or so of the field work. During this time, I would concentrate on language learning and Nooran on the interviewing. Both of these techniques should be focused in such a way

as to help us become acquainted with the community and to help them become acquainted with and confident in us. At this same time, we would collaborate in compiling a community profile which would try to identify as large a part of the community as possible, and classify them by sex, age, education, sub-community membership and any other factors which are likely to be sociolinguistic variables. This information would help guide us in selecting a representative cross-section with whom to conduct the FSI interviews. After this initial period of getting acquainted, another period of travel beyond the immediate community could be scheduled to help get an impression about how far the language group extends, what neighboring groups are present, how typical the composition of the original community is. This would also serve as a time to try out new language skills.

In the particular case of the Bishigram valley, I suspect that the Ustaj group is fairly small. There are, however, neighboring groups which need to be checked out. One is a group of Qashqari (Chitrali) immigrants down Bishigram who are reported to speak only Torwali. Still further up is a group who are said to speak Badeshi language, though one crotchety old man insisted late last fall that they had not used that language in six generations.

Write-up

The final phase of the project would be to write up the results. This would tentatively include four parts. The first part would simply be an activity report, indicating in a general way what work had been done by whom in what place and during what period of time. The second part would be an evaluation of the methodology, specifically of the interview technique, with suggestions for improvement in training and methodology.

The third part would give the findings, that is to say, a sociolinguistic description of the area. The fourth part, as I envision it, would be a first-person report by the national co-researcher giving his impressions of the experience and also his suggestions. This would be in addition to his contributions to the earlier three parts.

Appendix I: Interviewers

Prospective FSI interviewers normally must participate in a training program which for Peace Corps Language Testers required four to five days (ETS, 1970). On the surface, the FSI Oral Interview appears to be a normal everyday conversation, but it is supposed to be "a specialized procedure which uses the relatively brief testing period to explore many aspects of the student's language competence in order to place him in one of the categories (levels) described (ETS, 1970, p. 11). In order to reasonably duplicate the FSI requirements, two teams of two interviewers each were made up from a pool of one instructor and three graduate assistants at OCS [?]. Before collection of the speech data, all interviewers read the Manual for Peace Corps Language Testers (ETS, 1970) and listened to the fifteen training tapes of sample FSI Oral Interviews provided with the manual. A list of possible interview topics was given to each team.

(Hendricks et al, 1980, p. 79-80)

Appendix II: Interview Topics

Present Tense

Your usual day
Your hobby
Your present job
Your pet economy
The thing you dislike most
Your home, apartment or room
Your home town
Saturday afternoon in your home town
A holiday
Your favorite animal
The problems of an only child
Your big (or little) brother (or sister)
Your father's favorite sayings
Why you are in school
Your favorite subject (teacher, classmate) at school
What education means to you
Are examinations necessary?
Life in a college dormitory
Differences between high school and college
The importance of sports in college
Your best friend
Your worst enemy
An interesting person you know
The strangest person you know
Traffic problems
The best kind of vacation
Why you like (don't like) television
What makes a good movie?
Small towns versus large towns

Past Tense

A frightening experience
Your most embarrassing moment
Your biggest surprise
What you did last weekend
An untrue story you told
Your most interesting trip
Your first long trip
An important event in your life
One time when you were misunderstood
Why you decided to come to this school or city
A folk tale
A movie or play you enjoyed (or didn't enjoy)

Future Tense

The world in the year 2000
What will probably happen in the next 6 months
Things you intend to do
What you will probably do tomorrow
Your plans for a vacation
Your plans for the next weekend (next year)
The plans you have for your children or grandchildren

Should or Imperative

How to be a good tourist

Travel tips

How to bake a cake, a pie (recipes and instructions)

Should married women work outside the home?

Conditional

If you had a million dollars

If you had three wishes

If you governed the world

If you had not come to this school

If you knew you had only two weeks to live

How would you teach English?

The changes you would make in this city

If you were the last person alive

Direct and Indirect Speech

A conversation you had this morning

A conversation you overheard

Bibliography

Educational Testing Service. 1970. Manual for Peace Corps Language Testers. Quoted in Hendricks, et al (1980).

Hendricks, Debby, George Scholz, Randon Spurling, Marianne Johnson and Ed. Vandenburg. 1980. "Oral Proficiency Testing in an Intensive English Language Program." Chapter 7 (pp 77-90) in Oller & Perkins (1980). Compares a modified FSI oral interview technique with three testing methods that are somewhat simpler to apply (repetition, oral cloze and reading aloud) and with a standardized placement battery. Concludes that the FSI scales of Accent, Grammar, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension correlate so closely as to represent a single oral language ability factor. The repetition score seems to correlate better than the other scores do with the overall FSI rating. One caution in placing too much weight on the conclusions: the subjects, all ESL students, while "they tended to be students who were more confident about their skill in English, ... their overall level of performance was not particularly high on the FSI scales...., [T]his group would get a mean proficiency rating of 1+ [and so] would be able to do little more than fulfill minimum travel needs." (p. 79) The experiments with a wider range of subjects would provide conclusions much more useful for our purposes.

Oller, John W., Jr. and Kyle Perkins. 1970. Research in Language Testing. Rowley, Massachusetts 01969 USA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc. Available at American Center Library, Peshawar, call number 407.011. Many of the contributions included were originally presented at the 1st International Conference on Frontiers in Language Proficiency and Dominance Testing held at Southern Illinois University, April 1977.

"Complementary sequel to Language in education: testing the tests

Quakenbush, Steve. 198?. Title?. PhD dissertation at Georgetown University. Available in the KTM survey library, and in the Postwar survey library. Deals primarily with self evaluation questionnaires ("Can you ... ?") as a tool to evaluate bilingual ability. Describes the training of Filipino interviewers and the use of the interview technique to validate the self evaluation technique.